

The Deserts of Nations

In "A Mirror for Artists"—his contribution to Agrarianism's classic manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, published in 1930—Donald Davidson attacked what he called "the industrial theory of the arts." According to this Maecenas concept, industrialism can be counted on to create an artistic renaissance in which not the wealthy classes only but the plain people will share. Davidson thought otherwise. "Industrialism cannot play the role of Maecenas, because its complete ascendancy will mean that there will be no arts left to foster; or, if they flourish at all, they will flourish only in a diseased and disordered condition."

I am reminded of Mr. Davidson's skepticism roughly once a week, while listening to National Public Radio's *Performance Today*: sponsored, in part, by the National Endowment for the Arts, whose slogan is "A Great Nation Deserves Great Art." Obvious corollaries to this axiom are that a woman of great beauty deserves great wealth to boot and that Lynne Cheney, as director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, deserved a great intellect. I doubt, however, that Donald Davidson would have agreed with these propositions, which would be ridiculed out of hand by any competent moral philosopher. Nations, to a greater extent still than individuals, generally deserve exactly what they have, no more and no less—even when democratic sentiment and demagogic politicians assure them otherwise.

Jefferson was confident that public schooling would produce universal literacy, which, in turn, would promote popular enlightenment; John Adams wrote that he devoted his life to public affairs so that his sons might study history and philosophy, and his grandsons dedicate themselves to the arts. But Jefferson's idea of a great nation was the polar opposite of Hamilton's (or David Brooks'), while his expectations for the success of the public-school system were something short of those entertained by a modern philanthropic behemoth. More importantly, to their more sober and realistic minds, the development of American high culture either preceded national greatness or developed as a concomitant

of it. Kenneth Minogue argues that political policy devised to attain the conditions of freedom will end, more likely than not, by destroying free behavior and that the quest for political freedom is necessarily the pursuit of something else. The same is true of anything worth having, including art, of the "great" as well as the not-so-great variety.

Freedom, art, national greatness—these things cannot be created by research and development programs, subsidized by rich foundations, underwritten by federal tax breaks, and promoted by educational programs. They are natural growths occurring organically, not artificial creations imagined as a people's just deserts waiting to be supplied by superjobbers from the private and public spheres. In respect of the arts, the most that philanthropic organizations can hope to accomplish is to preserve and transmit fragments of the dead civilization that the parents and grandparents of their founders helped to destroy. It is meaningless to say that a great nation deserves great art, if only for the reason that the formula is tautological: Lacking a distinguished artistic tradition, a nation cannot be said to be "great" at all. You will never hear a Frenchman say that France, as a great nation, deserves great art, because he understands that his country is both great in its artistic past and artistic in its national greatness. France, in other words, remains a civilization—as the United States was once (however modestly by comparison), before she chose to sacrifice that achievement on the altar of economic success and military power.

The fatuity of the NEA's assertion exemplifies the truth of Davidson's argument and indicates the magnitude of the problem confronting the arts in modern times. Industrial society, being what it is, supposes that industry and commerce can support and encourage art without industrializing it. (Or, perhaps, it assumes that the industrialization of *anything* is an improvement over the same thing in its preindustrialized form.) Its intellectual confusion is the result of industrialism's inability to understand the concept of reason in making (Aquinas's definition of art) that is so at odds with its own



shibboleth, which is making for a reason. Donald Davidson knew better:

For [the arts] have been produced in societies which were for the most part stable, religious, and agrarian; where the goodness of life was measured by a scale of values having little to do with the material values of industrialism; where men were never too far from nature to forget that the chief subject of art, in the final sense, is nature.

The Industrial School of fiction popular around the turn of the last century (Zola, Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Frank Norris) is an example of how artistic talent may be narrowed and impoverished by the constrictive industrial milieu, when it accepts the industrial world for the world itself. At the opposite end of the creative process, the iron logic, irreversible direction, and irresistible momentum of industrialism are all apparent in the publishing industry today, the former swarm of distinguished small imprints having been consolidated and cartelized into a handful of so-called "major" publishers, themselves owned by corporate giants whose chief business is manufacturing toothpaste and producing gas and oil. The rationale given for consolidation was that bigger publishers meant more money to publish more good books, as well as bigger advances and other emoluments for their authors. Instead (it would have come as no surprise to either Davidson or Maecenas), consolidation has resulted in the commercialization of a once gentlemanly industry, including the ruthless imposition of the rule of the bottom line, the trashing of American letters, and the exponential expansion of a beggarly literary class unable to get its best work (or any work at all) into print by the "major"

publishers. The condition of the national letters these days appears nearly hopeless. Whether it is or is not, the situation is not one that the NEA is in a position to alleviate or cure, even if it showed any sign of wanting to try (which, so far as I know, it does not).

In the end, the focus of industrialism and the values that determine that focus ensure disaster for the arts in industrial society, even more than its logic does. Industrialism has no use for what T.S. Eliot called the permanent things, since the permanent things are not susceptible to industrialization: Insofar as they can be "produced" at all, they cannot be mass-produced and mass-marketed (though they *can* be exploited in the marketing of the productible, impermanent things). Nor can what is permanent be rendered obsolete and made replaceable, at a profit. It is true, industrialism does its best to make Truth obsolete by offering all sorts of heresies, diversions, and baubles in its place: inventing and reinventing religions, churches, philosophies, "values"—even human nature itself. But industrialism, though enjoying the gift of seemingly endless production, lacks the God-given gift of creation. Thus it can fill the world with artifacts, but not with creatures and the life-given and life-giving creations creatures depend on. (If ever it should succeed in creating "creatures" of its own, they will be mere artifacts, too, of course.) Industrialism, then, produces a world that is ever more artificial and less natural, more passing and less permanent, like the values and ideas its activity expresses, and upon which it depends. And to the extent that the world becomes increasingly artificial, the people who inhabit that world grow increasingly inhuman—which is to say, unreal.

How can the artist succeed in making art from an artificial wasteland populated by a mass of industrialized humanoids? Eliot identified the dilemma poetically in 1922; Donald Davidson posed it in a political and cultural manifesto less than a decade later. Eliot's speculative treatment of the problem was theoretical, philosophical, poetical; Davidson's statement practical, realistic, and thoroughly down-to-earth. What he was pointing to is only the fundamental question concerning artistic enterprise in the 20th and 21st centuries: How does the artist approach reality by the venue of the unreal? How does art—whose final subject is nature, remember—survive its replacement by the artificial environment (the sprawling

suburbs and mechanized supermetropolises) that industrialism has substituted for the natural—that is to say, the human—one? How does New Jersey, Houston, or Los Angeles provide artists with the intuition of the permanent things and their objectification—both of which are necessary to the creation of anything beyond a pale imitation, or grotesque travesty, of a genuine work of art? The problem is intensively reinforced by the mass industrialization of education, communication, culture, and, increasingly, political discourse. It begins to seem almost assured, as Davidson expected, that the arts, in the sense of a connected and recognized institution, cannot in the long run survive the industrial system—and now the postindustrial one, which looks more inimical still to their future.

The denatured postindustrial wasteland, hardwired to the empty chaos of cyberspace, cannot provide the kinds, or the variety, of intense human experience that have historically provided the arts with their inspiration, subject, and object. That, really, is the crux of the matter. It was said of Christopher Wren, "If you seek his monument, look around you." So it is with the arts in a postindustrial world—only these monuments are not living stones, but monuments of a different sort: They are tombstones, in fact. Novels, poems, plays; paintings, sculpture, architecture; operas, symphonies, chamber music: They are, most of them, dead—the creations of dead people deprived of the naturally grounded lives human nature requires and art demands. We know the answer to the question, What good can come out of Nazareth? Yet there is something almost infinitely less than Nazareth here. It is called New Canaan, or Terre Haute, or Tempe, Arizona. Perhaps the best writer to have come out of suburbia is John Updike—a talent of Shakespearean breadth and depth by comparison with subsequent generations of American novelists. Industrial civilization, ultimately, gives artists nothing to work with, nothing to get their hands on or their minds into. Art is rooted in reality. When industrialism removes nature from experience, denies the permanence of metaphysical truth, and transforms human multiplicity into a social uniformity imposed by the logic of democratic consumerism, art, in the true sense, becomes an impossibility in a new and unreal world, pioneered and realized most fully by America.

In order for us to love our country, said

Burke, our country must be lovely. What goes for patriotism goes for art as well. Before the industrial era, artists did not take for their subjects the ugly, the perverted, the demented, the chaotic: That phenomenon was reserved for the industrialized modern age. Art arranges, rearranges, and heightens reality as the artist perceives and experiences it. For art to reflect loveliness, there must be loveliness for it to reflect—as an influence, as a model, and as a grateful response. Given a nation that is truly lovely, she will see herself reflected naturally and abundantly, without the aid of a national endowment. And alternatively, writers, composers, painters, and sculptors raised in a wasteland of shopping malls, commercial strips, industrial parks, blighted farmland, and plastic suburbs will reflect not just the unloveliness surrounding them, but—since aesthetics is a branch of moral philosophy, as Burke understood—the encompassing moral sink as well.

"A great nation deserves a great cuisine."

"A great nation deserves great style."

"A great nation deserves great learning."

"A great nation deserves great piety."

"A great nation deserves great politicians."

"A great nation deserves a great war."

Perhaps national greatness resembles personal greatness in being a quantity, like freedom, that should not be sought consciously and for itself, and cannot be attained that way. Perhaps, also, the NEA's motto is in need of modification. Or perhaps it should be scrapped altogether. Whether the great society is properly accompanied by great art depends on your notion of greatness, after all. And of art. The important thing to understand is that deserts have nothing to do with it, anymore than the physique of Arnold Schwarzenegger deserves the genius of Mozart or Cervantes. 

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